

NEW MEDIA, DEMOCRACY & DEVELOPMENT

An Idea for Viksit Bharat

Editors

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**D.P.S. PUBLISHING HOUSE
NEW DELHI-110002**

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Chapter-6

Maithili as a Language of Identity and Resistance

Anshu

Rahul Ranjan

Chapter Summary

This paper looks at how Maithili turned into a shared language of emotion, memory and collective action in Mithila and how that change shaped the region's place in the Indian freedom movement. Beginning with its position under the Karnat rulers, the study follows Maithili as it moves from royal and learned settings into wider public use, eventually gaining a place in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution. The discussion centres on the period from about 1850 to 1947, when new printing technologies, local newspapers, pamphlets and literary initiatives in Maithili opened spaces where caste questions, regional grievances and anti-colonial politics converges. In these arenas, Maithili did more than carry information; it framed debates on who belonged to Mithila, what counted as its culture and how this regional identity could connect to ideas of an Indian nation.

Introduction

The Central Institute of Indian Languages states that the stages of evolution of the Maithili language are as follows: (i) Proto-Maithili (8th–11th century); (ii) Early Maithili (12th–16th century); Middle Maithili (17th–18th century); and Modern Maithili (18th century and beyond). The first known mention of Maithili can be found in Kirtilata

by Vidyapati (1350–1450 A.D.). Maithili, also known as Proto-Maithili, was a kind of Apabhramśa that is widely spoken in Vidyapati's native area. In his *Introduction to Alphabetum Brahmanicum* of Cassiano Beligetti, published in Rome in 1771 A.D., Johannes Christophorus Amadutias included Taurutiana, also known as Tirhutia or Maithili, as one of India's eight primary languages. This language is called Mythil by Reverend William Carey in his *Linguistic Survey*, published in 1876. Then came G.A. Grierson, S.W. Fellon (1879), Thomes Erskine Perry (1856), Campbell (1874) and numerous others.

Socioeconomic, political and cultural events have affected the dynamic and historically dependent process of dialects evolving into full-fledged languages. As a result, it has been challenging to develop strict or generally applicable standards for differentiating languages from dialects or for deciding whether to include them in the Indian Constitution's Eighth Schedule. The difficulty of linguistic classification is shown by the fact that attempts in this direction, most notably by the Pahwa Committee (1996) and the Sitakant Mohapatra Committee (2003), failed to provide set norms. Acknowledging this, the Indian government has said that requests to be included to the Eighth Schedule are closely linked to linguistic identity, cultural goals and use trends.

The Maithili instance is very illuminating. Maithili was once considered a dialect but due to its extensive usage, rich literary heritage and unique grammatical structure, it was later acknowledged as a separate language. The state's acknowledgment of changing linguistic realities and the increasing assertion of regional and vernacular identities within the Indian nation-state are reflected in its placement in the Eighth Schedule in 2003, among languages like Bodo, Santhali and Dogri.

The years 1850–1947 are crucial to understand Mithila's identity, especially with regard to its language Maithili. During this time, a number of sociopolitical, cultural and linguistic factors came together to influence Mithila's identity, conflicts and self-representation. First, a significant turning point in the recording of Mithila's history was the appearance of written historical narratives in languages like Urdu and Hindi. Before then, the rich cultural legacy of Mithila was mostly passed down orally, based on old writings such as the *Smritis*, *Samhitas*, *Upanishads* and *Puranas*. A more comprehensive grasp of Mithila's past and the spread of historical narratives made possible by the development of print technology as demonstrated by the creation of pressure around the city.

Additionally, at this time, Mithila's linguistic environment saw substantial changes. Persian, Arabic, Urdu and finally Hindi coexisted with Sanskrit, which was long regarded by Maithil Pandits as the language of higher instruction. The complicated linguistic environment of Mithila, where several languages fought for dominance, was mirrored in the efforts of individuals like Bihari Lal "Fitrat" and Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh to promote various languages. But what really highlighted Mithila's need for self-representation was the development of Maithili as a written language. A new era in Maithili literature began in 1915 with the publication of *Mithila Darpan* by Ras Bihari Lal Das, which signaled a break from the dominance of Sanskrit and other languages. The standardization of scripts like Devanagari, Kaithi and Tirhuta promoted a sense of linguistic solidarity among Maithils and made it easier to publish Maithili writings.

Furthermore, colonial involvement and indigenous resistance defined Mithila's sociopolitical terrain throughout this time. The conflicts between colonial goals and native ambitions were brought to light by the Court of Wards' governance of the Darbhanga Raj and initiatives to advance Hindi and English education. With divergent opinions on the relative importance of Sanskrit, Hindi and Maithili, the Maharajas of Darbhanga had a significant influence on Mithila's educational policy.

The Maithili movement aimed to recover Maithila's cultural legacy and linguistic identity. It was led by academics, activists and groups like the Maithil Mahasabha. The dominance of Hindi and Sanskrit in the fields of education and administration was challenged by the publications like *Mithila Moda* and *Mithila Mihir*, which offered forums for social change and intellectual discussion. But the movement also had to contend with internal issues including disagreements about Maithili standardization and caste divides within Maithil society. The inclusive spirit of the Maithili movement was undermined by the discriminatory actions of groups like the Maithil Mahasabha, which unintentionally excluded non-Brahmin and non-Kayastha people.

Methodological Approach

The approach is based on a comprehensive analysis of primary and secondary sources that include a broad range of texts related to the historical, literary and sociolinguistic aspects of the Maithili language and its cultural context. The inquiry is based on primary materials, which include important works like "A National Language for India" by

Z.A. Ahmad and “History of Maithili Literature” by Jayakant Mishra, among others. These books provide priceless insights into Maithili’s literary richness, development and sociopolitical setting.

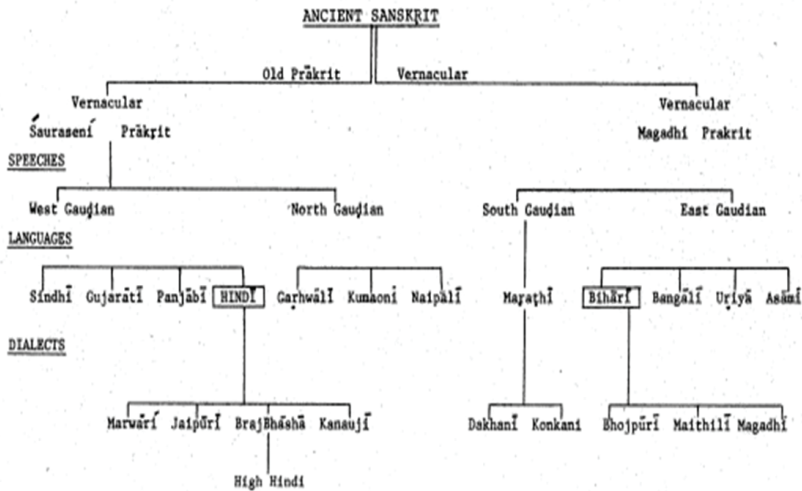


Fig.1. Grierson’s (1883) genetic classification of New Indo-Aryan languages.

Secondary sources have been carefully examined in addition to main sources to enhance the study environment. Scholarly publications like Richard Burghart’s “A Quarrel in the Language Family” and unpublished project reports like “The Maithili Language Movement in North Bihar: A Sociolinguistic Investigation” offer other viewpoints and analytical frameworks. Furthermore, books like Devkanta Jha’s “History of Modern Maithili Literature” and Radhakrishna Chaudhary’s “A Survey of Maithili Literature” provide critical analysis and place Maithili literary traditions in the context of larger historical and cultural trends.

The basis of this study is the synthesis of primary and secondary sources, which enables a thorough comprehension of the Maithili language movement, its historical relevance and its current sociolinguistic dynamics. The study aims to provide a complex and multidimensional analysis by triangulating several textual sources, illuminating the complex relationship between language, culture and identity in the Maithili-speaking area of North Bihar. This methodological approach

guarantees a thorough and comprehensive investigation of the study topic, adding to the academic conversation on the Maithili language and culture.

Vernacular Nationalism And The Making of Maithili Identity

According to Benedict Anderson's concept of Imagined Communities, a nation is perceived as a collective construct, necessitating individuals who come together, strive and aspire in unison to forge a community in a manner previously unimaginable. Anderson further highlights two characteristics of 'newer nationalisms' that revolutionized the traditional landscape. Firstly, the prominence of a 'national print language' emerged as a pivotal element of ideological or political significance in nearly all cases. Secondly, these movements drew inspiration from both distant and recent predecessors, offering visible models for emulation. Consequently, contemporary historiography is acknowledged as integral to a broader 'struggle for political power' and serves as a tool for diverse communities to assert their identities.

In his critique of Chomsky's linguistic theories outlined in "Language and Symbolic Power" (1991), Pierre Bourdieu challenges the notion of a purely homogeneous speech community and questions the distinction between linguistic competence and performance. He argues that language is deeply intertwined with social, historical and political contexts, emphasizing that linguistic phenomena cannot be understood in isolation. Bourdieu suggests studying language emergence within specific geographical and political contexts, highlighting how religion and politics exploit linguistic inequalities for ideological ends. Additionally, he proposes investigating the standardization and competition of vernacular languages, particularly in colonial settings like India, where vernacular movements strive for distinct political identities within the broader national framework. Studying vernacular politics in pre-colonial India offers deeper historical insights, potentially reshaping the understanding of India's nation-region dynamics. Sheldon Pollock highlights the underexplored nature of such studies, emphasizing their transformative impact on cultural, social and political realms. These processes involved deliberate efforts by local literary figures to create distinct identities, often diverging from the dominance of Sanskrit. Despite the diverse nature of these processes, Pollock identifies three common threads: localizing literary traditions, representing geocultural spheres and elevating vernacular literature in royal courts.

In their recent work, Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee explore

alternative avenues for investigating vernacular histories, highlighting the distinct challenges inherent in such studies compared to conventional historical research. They emphasize the need for methodologies beyond traditional archival approaches, as vernacular histories draw from ethnologies, folklore and cultural expressions, often revealing biases and shaping identity politics. Despite complexities, Aquil and Chatterjee argue that delving into these narratives unveils unique trajectories of modernity in South Asia, challenging conventional historical paradigms.

Krishna Kumar discusses the evolution and standardization of modern Hindi, attributing its development to various factors such as print media, education and employment opportunities. He emphasizes how language became a unifying force and a symbol of identity for both Muslim and Hindu elites. David Lelyveld explores how language was manipulated by foreign powers to shape institutional boundaries and political structures. Alok Rai critiques Hindi nationalism, arguing that colonial intervention imposed Hinduness on Hindi, preceding the advocacy by Hindu elites. Rai sees MacDonnell's 1900 declaration allowing Hindi in courts as a political maneuver.

Francesca Orsini's "The Hindi Public Sphere" explores language politics in the region, documenting how print media contributed to the emergence of new Hindi literary journals, shaping a confined yet significant public sphere in the heartland. She delves into the impact of school curricula, teaching methods and Kavi Sammelans on this sphere's expansion. Orsini challenges the notion of Hindi as India's national language, asserting its construction as an ideological concept. Additionally, she scrutinizes the role of literary figures like Mahavir Prasad Dwivedi, who promoted Hindi, linking it with national identity. Through analyses of figures including Madan Mohan Malviya and Purushottam Das Tandon, she underscores their deliberate efforts in positioning Hindi as India's national language.

In "The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions," Vasudha Dalmia explores the evolution of modern Hindi from its initial adoption as the language of Hindus to its later embrace as the language of Indian nationalists. Focusing on Bharatendu Harischandra's influence in 19th-century Banaras, she highlights the pivotal role of his literary works in shaping this linguistic identity. Dalmia also delves into the involvement of the merchant class in language activism, particularly in advocating for Hindi's recognition in courts, establishing Allahabad and Banaras as key hubs of the Hindi movement. Her analysis elucidates the ideological, socio-religious and cultural underpinnings of the Hindi

language movement in 19th-century India.

The Maithils had very rigid and deeply rooted social rules and there was little intercaste interaction. Even Brahmins were divided into high and low status according to the Panji system in Mithila, which created a clear hierarchy within Maithil society. This division was purportedly based on purity but was really thought to be influenced by things like wealth, moral behavior and familial lineage. Additionally, literate Maithils were divided into two categories: those who were educated in English and those who were fluent in Sanskrit. Despite being more numerous, the Sanskrit-educated group clung to the value of Sadachar (moral behavior) and was ignorant of and cautious about contemporary social conventions. On the other hand, even though they were fewer, English-speaking people were better off financially, held important administrative posts and were knowledgeable about contemporary legislation. They allegedly did not give Sadachar priority, though. They were forced to follow Sadachar despite being outnumbered, even if they didn't fully agree. The goal of these magazines was to reform Maithili society.

Caste prejudice and transactional marriage were among the practices that were questioned. The progression of a person's caste was once used as a gauge of societal and national success. In Mithila, however, attempts were made to bring all castes together. For example, efforts were made to create Janaknandini Mahavidyalaya, a residential institution that would accept students from all castes. Twenty-eight thousand signatures were collected to start this project, inviting involvement from a variety of castes, including Ojha, Upadhyaya, Mishra, Thakur, Singh, Rai, Das, Mandal and Raut. A prize of five rupees and a pair of dhotis were offered to anyone who contributed a thousand signatures and a permission letter.

The history of the Maithili movement reveals more than just resistance to Hindi's claim of Maithili as a dialect. It showcases a dual trend: Hindi's ascent as the national language strengthened, while Maithili identity grew, distinct from Hindi. Paul Brass's work on the Maithili movement is notable but it primarily focuses on the movement's initial decades post-Independence, highlighting its lack of cohesive leadership. However, Brass overlooks the evolving Maithili identity, transcending caste, gender and religion, over a century. Viewing linguistic movements solely as political tools ignores their deep cultural and psychological significance, evident in Maithili's enduring struggle for recognition.

Several journals, like Mithila Moda, depicted Mithila as “desha” or “appan desha” in a social and cultural sense, while most Maithili speakers identified politically with Bharatvarsha (India). In the late nineteenth century Mithila context, Bihari Lal ‘Fitrat’ was proficient in Persian, Arabic and Urdu, regarding them as integral to Mithila’s cultural and intellectual fabric. Bihari Lal categorized the local vernacular as Ganvari (uncultured) Hindi, spoken by the illiterate and Sanskritised Hindi, the language of the literate. However, he cited Maithili as an example of Ganvari Hindi. Surendra Gopal observed that Urdu began replacing Persian in daily life, literature, education and administration from the latter half of the eighteenth century, indicating Persian’s earlier role as the language of administration.

Bihari Lal penned Mithila Darpan in Hindi, referring to it as the “National Language.” The aim was to acquaint non-Maithils with Mithila’s rich history and culture. He termed Maithili as the “household language.” These historical endeavors also aimed to delineate Mithila’s boundaries. While Mithila is referenced in ancient texts like the Brihad Vishnu Purana, popular perception often saw it as a recent concept. Ras Bihari Lal Das, in Mithila Darpan, notes that by the early 20th century, Darbhanga alone was recognized as Mithila. Even within Darbhanga, areas like Madhubani, Khajauli and Benipatti were considered integral to Mithila, with Madhubani serving as its focal point. However, the region’s modern development commenced in the latter half of the 19th century, driven by technological advancements.

The newspaper exhorted the respectable people of Mithila, also referred to as Shreeman and mostly made up of wealthy landowners, to carry out their duty of kindly supporting Maithili periodicals. Its main objective was to improve and develop the indigenous language of all Maithils, which refers to the whole population of Mithila. However, the Maithili movement’s supporters continued their difficult mission to develop the language. The head librarian of the Rajakiya Sanskrit Library in Darbhanga, Parmeshwar Sharma, praised Mithila Moda’s efforts and made recommendations for improving Maithili’s writing. highlighted the importance of writing books in Maithili, saying that it was the duty of all Maithils, not just him, to show appreciation to those who worked to advance and improve their mother tongue. In order to progressively create a uniform writing style in the language, Sharma suggested that educated Maithils should first write novels in Maithili in accordance with their individual styles. Three periodicals were produced despite having a little readership: Mithila Mihir from

Darbhanga, Tirhut Akhabar from Muzaffarpur and Mithila Hitsikhsa from Muniyari.

Ayodhya Prasad recounts a meeting where efforts to introduce education in the local language were discussed, both by the community and the colonial rulers. It was agreed upon to petition the Governor-General in Council to adopt the vernacular language for higher education and exams in the province. Although the government endorsed promoting vernacular language in schools, it's unclear which specific language like Hindi, Urdu, or Maithili was intended. Bihari Lal 'Fitrat's "Aina-i-Tirhut," a significant historical work on Mithila, was first published in 1883, acknowledging Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh's support. Lal emphasizes Mithila's unique history, culture and identity, referring to Tirhut as the Mithila nation within the Bihar province, marking the explicit conceptualization and expression of Mithila as a distinct region.

Bihari Lal also depicts the affluent strata of Maithili society, comprising numerous Brahmins, Rajputs and Bhumihar Zamindars. However, it was the Khattris, Agarwals and Shahus who held greater financial power. He highlights Rai Nandipat Mahatha of Muzaffarpur, whose yearly income was estimated at eight to nine million rupees, surpassing even Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh, the foremost Zamindar in the area, who earned around two and a half million rupees annually. At the onset of Mithila Darpan, it is noted that there was a lack of historical accounts accessible to the people of Mithila to acquaint them with their past glories and societal conditions. Hetukar Jha further asserts that at the beginning of the twentieth century, there were no historical records of this region available in Hindi or Maithili; previous works were in Urdu. This scarcity made it exceedingly challenging for literate individuals of the time to access and read texts like Aina-i-Tirhut or Riaz-i-Tirhut.

Parmeshwar Jha, in his Mithila Tatvavimarsha, the first Maithili work on the region's history, provided a perspective on both India and the British Empire, from a loyalist standpoint. He regarded Hindi as the primary language of India, comprehensible to all, while acknowledging the existence of numerous provincial languages such as Bangla, Maithili (Tirhutiya), Nepali, Panjabi, Brajbhasha, Maarbari, Marhatti, Gujarati, Dravir, Telangi, Madrasi, Oriya, etc. Despite Hindi being deemed the principal language, he recognized Maithili as a significant provincial language within India. His portrayal of Mithila is exceedingly comprehensive, covering diverse topics including its

historical narrative, Sanskrit scholars, Maithili literary activities, the Mithila Dialect, Brahman Marriage customs, the Darbhanga Raja, Bettiah Estate, European factories for indigo and sugar manufacturing and a map of Tirbhukti (also known as Mithila). While acknowledging Mithila's ancient roots, he predominantly refers to it as Tirhut. Additionally, he delves into the intriguing story behind classifying the region's vernacular as Maithili.

Hetukar Jha, in the introduction to Grierson's *Maithili Chrestomathy*, highlights Sir George A. Grierson's pivotal role in acknowledging Maithili as a distinct language in the region for the first time. Grierson's contribution extends to authoring the first Maithili grammar book, published in 1880–1. Previously known as Tirhutiya, the language was recognized by William Adam during his survey of vernacular schools in Tirhut in the early 19th century, where he classified it as having a unique character called Tirhutia. Grierson's merit lies in bringing to light the rich literary heritage of Maithili, particularly for English-speaking audiences and philologists.

Grierson expressed optimism regarding Maithili's potential for literary expression. However, he categorized it alongside Magadhi (Magahi) and Bhojpuri as a dialect of his conceptualized Bihari language. Yet, the misrepresentation of Maithili wasn't solely the fault of colonial authorities; native scholars also held varying views on regional vernaculars. Bihari Lal 'Fitrat' labeled Maithili as Ganwari Hindi, a blend of Sanskrit and Hindi. Chanda Jha referred to it as Mithila Bhasha, while Ras Bihari Lal Das and Parmeshwar Jha also identified it as Mithila Bhasha or Gharao Boli. However, Parmeshwar Jha and Mukund Jha 'Bakshi' refrained from recognizing Maithili as the vernacular of the region in their works. Conversely, Gangapati Singh, in a 1916 article published in *Mithila Mihir*, designated it as Mithila Bhasha.

Chanda Jha (1831–1907) and Parmeshwar Jha (1856–1924) were instrumental in producing literature in Maithili. Chanda Jha traveled extensively in Mithila to achieve this goal, while Parmeshwar Jha authored "*Mithila Tatva Vimarsha*," the inaugural historical book on Mithila in Maithili. Although completed in 1919, the book wasn't published until 1949 by Vidyapati Press in Laheriya Sarai.

The subsequent publication detailing the history of Mithila was penned in English by Shyam Narayan Singh. Titled "*History of Tirhut*," it was printed in 1922 at the Baptist Mission Press in Calcutta, now known as Kolkata. Another notable work in Maithili is "*Mithila Bhashamaya Itihas*" by Mukund Jha 'Bakshi'. Ayodhya Prasad 'Bahar's

“Riaz-i-Tirhut” opens with homage to ‘Allah, the almighty’, followed by an extensive depiction of the kings, their residences, the populace, their territories, daily lives and cultural milieu of Mithila during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The choice of Urdu for the book’s composition over Maithili or Hindi was deliberate, influenced by Urdu’s usage in court administration and its prevalence in the urban social and cultural fabric of Mithila, particularly among the literati in towns like Darbhanga.

Ayodhya Prasad began his career in the British administration in 1853, holding various roles. When Maharaja Maheshwar Singh of Darbhanga passed away in 1860 and the Darbhanga Raj fell under the administration of the Court of Wards, Ayodhya Prasad was appointed as a subordinate officer responsible for managing records.

Conclusion

In the history of Bihar, India, the socio-political, cultural and linguistic aspects of Mithila between 1850 and 1947 are crucial. During this time, Mithila’s identity and especially its language Maithili, became a significant source of conflict and development. The predominantly oral transmission of Mithila’s cultural history was significantly altered by the emergence of written historical chronicles, which were made possible by the widespread use of print technology. This change emphasized Mithila’s need for self-representation while also deepening our awareness of its past. This accomplishment set the stage for future research into Mithila’s rich linguistic legacy by standardizing scripts and encouraging a feeling of linguistic identity among Maithils. In addition, the publishing of Mithila Darpan by Ras Bihari Lal Das marked a significant turning point in the literary and cultural history of Maithili.

Additionally, the research clarifies the complex interactions between indigenous resistance, colonial interference and the Maithili movement, providing crucial insights into the socio-political environment of Mithila. A complex picture of Mithila’s fight for power and cultural autonomy may be gained from the conflicts between colonial goals and indigenous ambitions, as demonstrated by the Court of Wards’ management of the Darbhanga Raj and the advancement of Hindi and English education. Furthermore, in opposition to Hindi and Sanskrit’s hegemony, the Maithili movement, led by academics and activists, sought to recover Maithila’s language identity and cultural legacy. However, the movement’s underlying complexity is highlighted by internal issues including caste differences and debate about uniformity. By exploring these complex relationships, the study not only contributed

to broader conversation knowledge of Mithila's past but also advances more general conversations about language, culture and identity in the area, influencing the direction of historiography in Bihar, India.

Maithali, being one of the oldest languages in India, Maithili has a rich literary legacy that includes works like the poetry of Vidyapati and it has great cultural and historical significance. For millions of people, it is an essential means of communication in Bihar, Jharkhand and certain areas of Nepal. In order to maintain Maithili's linguistic uniqueness and encourage its usage in government, education and cultural activities, it was essential to include it in the Eighth Schedule in 2004. Additionally, its inclusion guarantees government support for its advancement and enrichment, promoting its development as a language that reflects India's rich and varied culture.

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